20 (left) 'Fariburs Comes before Kay Khusru', from the Big Head Shahnameh of Firdausi, Gilan, Iran, 899/1493–9, opaque watercolour, gold and ink on paper, 28.4 × 16.2 cm, British Museum, OA 1992.5-7.01. The throne of Kay Khusru is placed on a white carpet with an overall black arabesque design. The painting depicts the rival for the throne, Fariburs, submitting to Kay Khusru while prisoners are led before them.

27 (right) Carpet with central medallion, early or mid-16th century, Tabriz, wool, 5.5 × 2.22 m, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, T.97. The field of this carpet, with its central medallion, four corner medallion pieces and spiral arabesques, is related to that of 16th-century bookbindings.
26 (left) ‘Fariborz Comes before Kay Khusrau’, from the ‘Big Head’ Shahnameh of Firdausi, Gilan, Iran, 899/1493–4, opaque watercolour, gold and ink on paper, 24.4 × 16.2 cm, British Museum, OA 1992-7-30. The throne of Kay Khusrau is placed on a white carpet with an overall black arabesque design. The painting depicts the rival for the throne, Fariborz, submitting to Kay Khusrau while prisoners are led before them.

27 (right) Carpet with central medallion, early or mid-16th century, Tabriz, wool, 5.3 × 2.22 m, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, T.97. The field of this carpet, with its central medallion, four corner medallion pieces and spiral arabesques, is related to that of 16th-century bookbindings.

in museum collections in Iran and elsewhere, but are almost entirely unpublished. Since all the areas around the Caspian are heavily wooded by comparison with the rest of Iran, wood was a natural choice for the columns and roofs of porches (isolars) on houses and public buildings. Possibly the painting and gessoing of ceilings, found in the seventeenth-century buildings of Isfahan, had already been practised in Gilan, Azerbaijan and Mazandaran in the early sixteenth century. In addition, wood was used for boxes containing multi-volume Qur’ans and large sarcophagi in which smaller stone coffins were placed.

While the main legacy of Shah Isma’îl I remains political and religious, both the unification of eastern and western Iran and the imposition of Shiism directly affected the visual arts. The movement of painters from Herat to Tabriz is perhaps the best-documented example of artists emigrating to the new royal atelier, and art historical evidence suggests that potters had already been drawn west at the end of the fifteenth century. The metalworkers of Khurasan continued to produce Timurid-style wares into the second decade of the sixteenth century, but their ideas were adopted and altered by metalworkers in western Iran. The role of certain decorative elements such as the spiral arabesque with split palmettes and Chinese cloud scrolls is more dominant in the decorative arts, illumination and architectural decoration of early sixteenth-century western Iran than in the art of the Timurids or Turkmans. Isma’îl’s conquest of Iran helped familiarize artisans with new ideas and probably new people. Yet, the true synthesis of the various artistic strains – Timurid, Turkman and regional – occurred in the next generation during the reign of Shah Tahmasp.
The Years of War

Shah Tahmasp at Tabriz

1524–1555

I said, ‘Who slew all these Ottomans?’
The morning breeze replied, ‘It was I!’

When Shah Isma‘il dispatched his first-born son, Tahmasp, to Herat in 922/1516 to serve as governor of Khurasan, the boy ‘was already showing signs of ability to rule’. He was placed under the guardianship of Amir Khan Mausillu, a Turkman lord. This appointment signalled to Isma‘il’s Uzbek enemies his resolve to protect his eastern flank and to hold onto the province. For the next five years, before Shah Isma‘il recalled him to Tabriz, the prince received his education at Herat, which until 912/1506 had been the last Timurid capital, a centre of high sophistication in letters and the arts. Like Isma‘il at Lahijan, it must be assumed that Tahmasp not only received the education expected of a young prince but also that the visual environment, namely the buildings, books and material culture to which he was exposed at Herat, all played a formative role in the development of his taste.

In 928/1522, when Amir Khan Mausillu was dismissed, Tahmasp returned to Tabriz and enjoyed two more years of relative freedom until the death of Shah Isma‘il in 930/1524 vaulted him to the Safavid throne. Because of his tender age Tahmasp did not immediately take up the reins of government. Rather, he spent the first decade of his reign, the so-called ‘Qazilbash Interregnum’, at the mercy of regents from various Qazilbash tribes. The seeds of the troubles that erupted when he came to the throne had been sown in the last decade of Shah Isma‘il’s rule following the rout of the Safavids at the Battle of Chaldiran when the authority of the shah was so severely shaken. On the one hand, Isma‘il tried to contain the fractious Qazilbash by appointing more Persians to high-level government posts but, on the other, his preference for hunting and carousing limited the time and energy that he could devote to controlling the Qazilbash.

With the accession of Shah Tahmasp the Qazilbash amirs who had been granted positions by Shah Isma‘il were in the strongest position to exert their authority. Thus Div Sultan Rumlu became the first vakil, or vice-regent, under Shah Tahmasp with the agreement of the leaders of the Takkalu and Dhu‘l Qadar tribes. Within a year his position was disputed by the head of the Ustajlu tribe. Although battle was averted in the short run, Div Sultan’s executions and imprisonment of his enemies ultimately led to showdowns in 932/1526 and 935/1526–7 and the defeat of the Ustajlus. Div Sultan’s star did not remain in the ascendency for long; his rival Chala Sultan Takkalu convinced Shah Tahmasp...
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that Div Sultan was to blame for the dissension among the Qizilbash. As a result in 954/1547–8 the thirteen-year-old shah shot an arrow at Div Sultan as he entered the divan (assembly hall), 'which, despite the Shah's lack of strength, struck Div Sultan on the chest. At a signal from Tahmasp Div Sultan was dispatched by the guards.'

Chuha Sultan then took over Div Sultan's post as rāzik. Yet he, too, followed the pattern of his predecessor by favouring members of his tribe in government and with grants of land. Although Safavid historians mention Shah Tahmasp's growing suspicion of his vice-regent, his perceived cowardice in a battle against the Uzbeks in 955/1548 at which the Shah was not only present but acted valiantly could only have eroded Chuha Sultan's authority at court. In the aftermath of this battle, Shah Tahmasp confirmed Husayn Khan Shamlu, the guardian of his brother Sam Mirza, as governor of Herat, a city that had suffered grievously from months of an Uzbek siege. In an effort to undo Husayn Khan, Chuha Sultan delayed sending aid to Herat for so long that the Uzbeks besieged the city again. Husayn Khan finally was forced to give up and negotiate with the Uzbeks for safe passage out of the city with Sam Mirza, his Qizilbash garrison and some of the Shiite population. Shah Tahmasp and his army, meanwhile, were on campaign in Baghdad and unable to come to Husayn Khan's aid. By early 956/1529–30 the call had gone out for an army to assemble for the reconquest of Khurasan. As Tahmasp and his army of 70,000 men advanced, the Uzbek leader, 'Ubayd Khan, discovered that his amirs would not support him in another battle against the Safavids and he decamped to wait for another opportunity to invade the province.

Meanwhile, Husayn Khan and Sam Mirza were making their way through Sistan to Shiraz. In 957/1530–31 Shah Tahmasp summoned them to meet him in the royal camp near Isfahan. Chuha Sultan saw this as his chance to do away with Husayn Khan, but Husayn Khan foiled his plot by going with a group of supporters to confront him in his tent. Chuha Sultan fled to the divan khāneh (assembly hall) where a struggle ensued and two arrows actually struck the royal crown. Although Chuha Sultan was mortally wounded, the Takkalu tribesmen kept his death a secret and prepared for the battle that ensued with the Ustajlus, Rumius, Dhu'l Qadars and Afshars. One of the Takkalu 'rushed into the dawlatkhana [royal residence] and tried to carry off the Shah to the Takkalu camp. Tahmasp had him put to death, and then gave the order for the execution of that misguided tribe.'

The mantle of power now passed to Husayn Khan Shamlu, who predictably favoured his fellow Shamlus with appointments and land grants. Moreover, he tightly controlled religious and political matters so that the shah had little scope to exercise his power independently. As the shah matured and external threats to Iran continued to require that he raise armies to defend his lands against the Ottomans and the Uzbeks, the Shamlu supremacy became increasingly oneroius. Finally, in 940/1533–4 Husayn Khan was suspected of plotting to poison the shah in order to replace him with Sam Mirza, his former princely charge in Herat and the shah's younger half-brother. Husayn Khan was also accused of conspiring with the Ottomans, who invaded Azerbaijan in late autumn 940/1533. Several Qizilbash leaders defected to the Ottoman side at this time, but before Husayn Khan Shamlu could follow suit, Shah Tahmasp had him executed. Instead of awarding another Qizilbash amir with the post of rāzik, Tahmasp appointed a Persian, Qadi Jahan, and made his brother Bahram Mirza commander of the Shamlu army. These appointments gave as clear a message as possible to the Qizilbash that their interregnum was finished and that Shah Tahmasp, now aged twenty, would henceforth operate as the absolute monarch of Safavid Iran.

By the time that Shah Tahmasp gained full control of his own government, the Uzbeks under 'Ubayd Khan had invaded Khurasan five times (in 920/1514, 952/1525–6, twice in 955/1528 and in 958/1551–2). Because Tahmasp's attentions were focused on putting down an insurrection in Azerbaijan in 958/1551–2, the Uzbeks were able to besiege Herat for a year and a half, during which time the civilian population was preyed upon by their Takkalu defenders, who were themselves reduced to eating cats and dogs. Finally in 940/1533–4 Shah Tahmasp marched on Khurasan. Successful battles, including one in Astarabad where the Safavids surprised the Uzbeks in the bath, intimidated the Uzbeks so much that instead of defending Mashhad and Herat, they withdrew across the Oxus. Yet 'Ubayd Khan was only waiting for another opportunity to return to Khurasan. When Sam Mirza and his guardian decided
Suleyman marched north again in the direction of Tabriz. Harried by small bands of Safavid skirmishers, the Ottomans turned toward Lake Van. While reports of Ottoman losses vary, the result of the Safavid–Ottoman engagements in eastern Anatolia in 942/1535 was that the Ottomans returned to Istanbul in 942/late 1555 without having greatly weakened either the Safavid military or the stability of Shah Tahmasp's government. Tahmasp, accused by historians of passivity and inaction, had clearly observed the tactical advantage of forcing his enemy to commit to a course of action before showing the Safavid hand, and of drawing his enemy further into the difficult terrain of Iran in order to stretch the Ottoman lines of supply to their limits.

When Shah Tahmasp returned to Tabriz in autumn 944/1557, he had been on campaign every year since 958/1551–2. Despite physical bravery in battle, his victories against the Uzbeks and Ottomans derived more from his skill as a tactician and his understanding of the impact that his presence in battle had on his enemies. Unlike his fiery, charismatic father, who could whip up his Qizilbash supporters with emotional politico-religious poetry, Tahmasp kept his own counsel, observed the actions of those around him and received reports of his enemies before acting. Yet, when the time was right, Tahmasp could be swift and decisive. Seditionists were executed, rebellious princes incarcerated and invading armies repulsed. It has been argued that Shah Isma'il's loss of the Battle of Chaldiran and the resulting damage to the Safavid house profoundly influenced Tahmasp's methods of fighting his Uzbeks and Ottoman foes. However, the prestige of the king on the battlefield still obtained under Tahmasp, as reports state that sightings of the gilded globe atop his personal standard invariably intimidated his enemies and in some cases caused them to flee rather than fight.

While Shah Tahmasp controlled the central Iranian lands by appointing members of his family and high-ranking amirs to provincial governorships, some outlying regions operated more as semi-independent principalities, bound to the Safavids through taxation and treaties. During a time of civil unrest in one of these principalities, Shirvan, the local population invited Shah Tahmasp to help restore order. His response was to send an army in 945/1558–9, led by his brother Aliq Mirza, to subjugate Shirvan.

The Years of War 43

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The nature of the Ottoman menace differed markedly from that of the Uzbeks. Whereas 'Ubayd Khan may have wished to extend his empire to include Khurasan, his Uzbek followers seem to have been more concerned with plundering the province as they were repeatedly unwilling to face Shah Tahmasb and his army in battle. The Ottomans, on the other hand, struck at the administrative heart of the Safavid realm but also threatened some of the most productive regions of the empire, Azerbaijan and Iraq Ajam (western Iran).

Until 959/1553 the Ottoman sultan Suleyman had been so occupied campaigning in eastern Europe that he had not taken advantage of Shah Tahmasb's divided attention between Uzbek invasions in the east and the various Qizilbash rebellions in Azerb.
After several months of battles and sieges, the Shirvanshah surrendered, offering to give up the fort of Bqurd to Shah Tahmasp himself. As a reward, Tahmasp appointed Aqas Mirza governor of Shirvan.

In 947/1540–41 Shah Tahmasp launched his first invasion of Georgia. Billed as a holy war, the reasons for this and three subsequent expeditions are somewhat more complicated than a simple desire to convert or punish the infidel. As early as 959/1552–3 Shah Tahmasp had ‘repented of all forbidden acts’. In addition to removing the tax rolls all revenue from taverns, gambling dens and brothels, Tahmasp himself gave up drinking alcohol and using intoxicants such as hashish. Thus a holy war would have been in keeping with Tahmasp’s sincere and growing enthusiasm for adhering to the precepts of Islam. For his armies, which by now were battle-hardened from more than a decade of fighting, such an expedition must have appeared an attractive means of increasing their wealth from plunder. Finally, even in his first Georgian expedition Shah Tahmasp may have understood the value of introducing new elements to Safavid society which would be more loyal to him than to the Qizilbash tribes. The immediate pretext for the invasion, however, was the need to subjugate a Georgian ruler who was raiding the territory of his neighbours, Tahmasp’s Georgian vassals. In fact Tahmasp failed to capture the rebellious Georgian leader, but his army did slay many Georgian men, took many women and children captive and made off with booty.

In response to a rebellion in Shirvan led by Aqas Mirza, Shah Tahmasp marched north again in 955/1546–7. Since the prince claimed to have seen the error of his ways, the shah changed course and staged another plundering mission in Georgia to coincide with an expedition that Aqas Mirza was leading to Circassia. When the shah learned that his brother had defied him again by striking coins in his own name, Tahmasp sent an army to take control of Shirvan. Aqas Mirza fled after losing two battles to Tahmasp’s forces. By 955/1548–9 he was in Istanbul, inciting Sultan Suleyman to invade Iran again.

The Ottoman invasion began in the spring of 955/1548. As before, they took Tabriz briefly, but their stay was cut short by a severe lack of food. Tahmasp had ordered his supporters to lay waste to all the territory from Tabriz beyond the Ottoman border and to block the underground water channels, the qanats, so that neither man nor beast could survive for long. Avoiding a pitched battle, the Safavids pursued the Ottoman army as it retreated towards Van and Erzerum. Their engagements with the Ottomans in eastern Anatolia met with success, but the war was not over yet. Aqas Mirza had meanwhile seized Hamadan and had taken hostage the wives and children of Bahram Mirza, his younger brother. To avoid a confrontation with the shah’s forces, Aqas fled south to Fars province and when city after city closed its gates to him, he proceeded to Baghdad. By 956/1549–50 the Ottomans saw no further use in Aqas Mirza. They sent a force against him and he fled back to Iran. Inevitably, he was taken into custody by the shah’s delegates, imprisoned and murdered soon afterward.

For reasons not unlike those for his previous Georgian expeditions, Tahmasp in 958/1551 once again led his army north to the aid of one of his vassals, and again he returned to Iran with ‘much wealth, countless prisoners, and flocks of sheep, goats and other animals’. War broke out again with the Ottomans in 961/1555–4 in Armenia, where the Safavids practised the scorched-earth policy as far west as Mush. Then, led by Tahmasp’s second son, Isma‘il Mirza, the Safavids defeated Iskandar Pasha, an Ottoman amir, and pursued him and his army to the walls of Erzerum. Although Persian sources portray the Ottomans as the invaders, it seems likely that the Safavid forays in Armenia precipitated Sultan Suleyman’s retaliation.

In Jumada II 961/May 1554 Sultan Suleyman decamped with a large army from his winter quarters at Aleppo and marched towards Qarabagh in Armenia. In preparation for a confrontation with the Ottomans, Shah Tahmasp had ordered two groups under separate commanders to storm the lands in the path of the Ottoman army. By the time the Ottomans reached Nakhchivan, they had exhausted their supplies and were forced to move west to Erzerum. Although Shah Tahmasp’s large army inflicted some damage on the Ottoman force, the war ended without a major confrontation. The two powers entered into formal peace negotiations and on 8 Rajab 962/29 May 1555 the Treaty of Amasya was ratified; it remained unbroken for the rest of the lives of both Sultan Suleyman and Shah Tahmasp. Despite the loss of Baghdad and Van to the Ottomans, peace on his eastern and western fronts
afforded Shah Tahmasp the crucial opportunity to set his own house in order. Not only did he move the Safavid capital to Qazvin, but he insisted in 963/1555-6 that his household and the great amirs make a public act of repentance to be followed by the population at large. This act has been interpreted as a decisive step in Tahmasp’s rejection of the Qizilbash elements of society, but it also marks one of the ways in which the shah tightened his control on the society that he ruled. Tahmasp’s increasing puritanism and superstition have been viewed as deleterious to the visual arts in Iran. Although his change in taste did not end all royal commissions, it certainly led to a change of emphasis. The works of art produced for Shah Tahmasp up to 962/1555 contrast markedly with those made - as often for his relations as for himself - after that date.

Until Shah Tahmasp moved the capital to Qazvin, his record of architectural accomplishments in many ways paralleled that of his father. He embellished and renovated the jami’ (congregational) mosques of Isfahan, Kirman and Shiraz, repaired the Mashhad and Ardabil shrines and many smaller mosques, tombs and shrines throughout Iran, but he undertook no new major construction. Before investigating the works that Tahmasp did commission before 962/1555, it is worthwhile discussing some of the reasons for his minimal impact on Safavid architecture in the first half of the sixteenth century. The city of Herat, where Tahmasp spent his early childhood, had been significantly developed under the Timurid sultan Shah Rukh, who made it his capital, and his wife Gauhar Shad in the first half of the fifteenth century. However, the building and garden complexes constructed outside the city by the last Timurid emperor, Sultan Husayn Bayqara, his most important amir, Mir ‘Ali Shir Nava’i, and other nobles would probably have had the greatest influence on Tahmasp. The sultan’s palatial assembly included ‘pavilions, government offices, the main residence (a qasr or kusk), a large reservoir bordered by four pavilions, and a meadow’. Associated with the nearby cemetery of Gazar Gah, these complexes were built high above the city of Herat with an eye to creating vistas in the direction of both the city and the domes of the cemetery.

Prince Tahmasp returned to Tabriz in 928/1522. There, as at Herat, the palaces and monuments such as the Blue Mosque erected by the Qaraqoyunlu and Aqqoyunlu Turkmans in the second half of the fifteenth century were still standing. An Italian merchant who visited Tabriz in 1507 remarked on the ‘palaces of former kings [that] are wonderfully decorated within and covered with gold on the outside, and of different colours; and each palace has its own mosque and bath, which are equally overlaid, and worked with minute and beautiful designs’. Although the author did not specify, the decoration he describes must have been predominantly tilework with painted walls above. The ‘gold on the outside’ would either have been lustreware tiles or paint. Also, as at Herat, palaces were built on the hillsides overlooking the city, with views from windows in a large hall described by the merchant as decorated with marble columns and a blue and gold tiled ceiling. Shah Isma’i’il preferred to spend his time hunting in the countryside, so the Safavid palatial assembly of Tabriz had probably changed little, if at all, since the time of the Italian merchant.

Having been reared in cities with large, ornately decorated buildings, the young Prince Tahmasp may not have seen the need to erect new buildings to replace them. Even his record of reno-
tion in the early years of his reign is sparse. However, in 958/1551–2, when he was fighting the Uzbeks and in Azerbaijan, the south ivan of the Masjid-i Jami’ in Isfahan (fig. 29) was renovated in his name. The thuluth inscription band that runs horizontally around the interior of the ivan states that Muhammad al-Isfahani repaired and embellished the mosque during the time of Shah Tahmasp and that Kamal al-Din Husain al-Hafiz al-Haravi was the scribe. On the left side of the façade another inscription states that the refurbishment was accomplished thanks to the generosity of Aqa Sultan. The band that runs around the outer edge of the arch contains cartouches with prayers to the twelve imams and Muhammad and Fatima, while the border to the façade was inscribed in 938/1531–2 with the first twenty-one verses of Surat al-Fatiha from the Qur’an; in 1072/1662 Shah ’Abbas II replaced verses 7 to 16 with his own renovation inscription.

Since Shah Tahmasp did not pay for the renovations of the Jami’ Mosque of Isfahan in 938/1531–2, it is unclear to what extent, if any, he was involved in the choice of decoration or inscriptions. As the scribe, Kamal al-Din Husain, was employed by the shah, the selection of Qur’anic verses for the mosque may have been made in Tabriz. Kamal al-Din Husain:

wrote good nastaliq, combined (jam’t) the ‘six’ scripts, and was an expert in diluting lapis lazuli. From Khorasan he came to (Persian) Iraq where he lived for some time in Qum. He was a good reader of the Qur’an. From Qum he went to the royal camp (court) ... He was a humble darvish. Shah Tahmasp bestowed upon him a tent, a horse, a camel, harness and equipment, but he did not accept them and was not tempted. He dressed in felt and traveled on foot.11

A scribe such as Kamal al-Din could have provided a scale drawing of his inscription, which master tile-makers would then have used as the basis for their mosaic faience. Although any number of wealthy people could have been named Muhammad al-Isfahani, it is more than possible that the patron of the repairs was Amir Mu’izz al-Din Muhammad Isfahani who served as sadr from 958/1551–2 to 945/1536–7. Whereas under Shah Isma’il the sadr had been responsible for imposing doctrinal unity, the position became less prominent once Shi’ism was largely accepted in Iran. 12 None the less, the sadr was the minister in charge of religious law and certain land grants, so he could have been expected to have the wealth, prestige and piety to pay for the renovations of one of the greatest Iranian mosques in the year that he was appointed to the highest religious post in the land.

Although almost nothing remains today of Shah Tahmasp’s palace in Tabriz, a detailed description of it has come down to us from Michele Membre, an Italian who arrived in Tabriz in 946/1539. Many features analogous to those in Membre’s account appear in illustrations to manuscripts completed for Shah Tahmasp in precisely the same period. When Membre reached Tabriz, Shah Tahmasp’s palace was being rebuilt. It was situated within a garden surrounded by walls of stone and earth with two gates. To the east lay a maidan (large plaza) next to which Shah Tahmasp was building a new mosque, and to the north were two other mosques side by side. Within the walls ‘the ways are divided off with bars of wood, because it is all gardens’. Near the gate were the Quchibashi, the head of the royal bodyguard, and the treasury ‘where the goldsmiths are’.13 As one approached the shah’s residential quarters, one passed the offices of his brother Bahram Mirza, his muezzin (keeper of the royal seals), Shah Quli Khalifa, and his chief minister, Qadi Jahan. The latter’s quarters were built next to the fourteenth-century mosque of ‘Ali Shah, now known as the Arg, which in 946/1539 served as an armoury. Also, in what had once been the courtyard of the mosque of ‘Ali Shah was a large pool with a rowing boat and pavilion in the centre. Both Shah Isma’il and Shah Tahmasp enjoyed themselves here either being rowed in the boat with friends or, in the case of Tahmasp, a devoted angler, fishing from the pavilion.14

The palace itself was reached through a portal lined with niches in which the qurchis (royal bodyguards) sat on the ground with their swords. ‘Passing on then,’ described Membre, to the west, on the left, is the great fair palace, with four chambers, one behind the other, with their carpets and antechambers, and at all the doors stand porters, in accordance with the importance of the doors; for, in the said chambers they are seated all around the walls within, one next to the other; and so the room where the Shah is is very small and beautiful, all worked with azure and

46 The Years of War
The minister in charge of religious law and certain land so he could have been expected to have the wealth, prestige and power to pay for the renovations of one of the greatest Iranian shrines in the year that he was appointed to the highest religious office.

Though almost nothing remains today of Shah Tahmasp’s in Tabriz, a detailed description of it has come down to us from Michele Membri, an Italian who arrived in Tabriz in 1590. Many features analogous to those in Membri’s account in his descriptions of manuscripts completed for Shah Tahmasp and his son Isma’il were in the same period. When Membri reached Tabriz, Shah Isma’il’s palace was being rebuilt. It was situated within a garden enclosed by walls of stone and earth with two gates. To the east a vast open space (large plaza) next to which Shah Tahmasp built a new palace, and to the north were two other mosques. Within the walls ‘the ways are divided off with bars of iron because it is an gardens’. Near the gate were the bazaar, the head of the royal bodyguard, and the treasury the goldsmiths were responsible for. As one approached the palace’s eastern entrance, one passed the offices of his brother Bahram Mirza, Mirza (keeper of the royal seals), Shah Quli Khatibi, and his minister, Qazi Jahan. The latter’s quarters were built next to the seven-centuries-old mosque of ‘Ali Shah, now known as the Arg, in 1496/1559 served as an armory. Also, in what had been once the courtyard of the mosque of ‘Ali Shah was a large pool rowing boat and pavilion in the centre, both Shah Isma’il and Shah Tahmasp enjoyed themselves here either being rowed in it with friends or, in the case of Tahmasp, a devoted angler, from the pavilion.

The palace itself was reached through a portal lined with niches and the gurghis (royal guards) sat on the ground with swords. ‘Passing on then,’ described Membri, we west, on the left, is the great fair palace, with four chambers, one behind the other, with their carpets and chambers, and at all the doors stand porters, in accordance with the importance of the doors; for, in the I chambers they are seated all around the walls within, next to the other; and so the room where the Shah is very small and beautiful, all worked with azure and
designed of foliage, as are all the chambers, with their vaults, and in the windows certain things which seemed to be statues of glass with figures in them. The second chamber is larger; along it sit his Sultans of higher rank; in the third other Sultans of lesser rank; in the fort gurghis who stand in favour with the King, and are waiting to become Sultans.

Nearby was a separate building of four rooms where the shah slept and another which was his bath. Services such as the stables, the kitchen and the armourers were located to the north-east, as was a small mosque.

In the same period that Shah Tahmasp was renovating his palace in Tabriz, he had also undertaken construction of a new building at the Ardabil shrine, the Jannat Sura [fig. 50]. Between 943/1536 and 949/1542–3 the shah had bought houses and enclosures at the north-east end of the shrine. The houses were razed to make way for the large, octagonal Jannat Sura and its dependencies and garden. Morton dates the completion of the building to around 946–7/1540. Although foreign travellers to Ardabil described the Jannat Sura as a mosque, no Persian sources do so. Called a maqbara (enclosure), it may have accommodated an overflu of dervishes at the shrine or served as a space for certain dervish rituals. Alternatively, Shah Tahmasp may have intended it as his own tomb, although ultimately he was buried at Mashhad. By the seventeenth century the building had suffered greatly from water damage, so the dome was repaired and at least partly covered with bricks and mortar and the interior was whitewashed. The dome had collapsed by the mid-nineteenth century and presumably much of the Safavid tilework was gone; what is visible today is mostly restored.

Fortunately the extant pair of carpets dated 946/1559–40 and known as the Ardabil carpets [fig. 51] provide us with some idea of the furnishings that would have been ordered for a new religious building such as the Jannat Sura. Since its acquisition in 1895 the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Ardabil carpet has elicited strong public interest and speculation about its original use at the Ardabil shrine. Recent research by King and others has demonstrated that in their original state, the Victoria and Albert Museum Ardabil carpet and its mate in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art could have just fitted the Auch Sura if laid side by side. Presumably damaged by the same leaks that led to the seventeenth-century repair of the dome, the carpets were moved to the Dar al-Huffaz and possibly the Chini-khaneh some time before 1845 when two English visitors remarked on a carpet dated 946/1559–40 in the Dar al-Huffaz. Most likely the carpets were sold to pay for repairs to the shrine in about 1884.

With its design of a shamsa or sunburst central medallion surrounded by sixteen oval cartouches, two pendant dome lamps, four corner pieces with sections of the central motif and four oval cartouches, a complex arabesque ground design and a main border design of alternating round and oblong cartouches, the more complete London Ardabil carpet is one of the finest expressions of Safavid religious art. Assuming the carpets were positioned in the centre of the Jannat Sura, their shamsa designs would have mirrored the dome above them. The inscription, from a ghazal said to be by the poet Hafiz, reads: ‘I have no refuge in the world other than thy threshold; My head has no resting place other than this doorway.’ In this setting the couplet may allude to the Muslim prayer ritual.
in which the worshipper would touch his head to the ground and raise it to look upwards, actions that would have emphasized the visual impact of both dome and carpets.

Although the designs of the two carpets are almost identical and both are knotted in wool on silk warps and wefts, the Los Angeles one has sixty-two knots to the square centimetre whereas the London example has forty-six. This discrepancy may indicate that the carpets were made in two workshops under the same management using the same cartoon. As the earliest examples of dated sixteenth-century knotted carpets and among the very few with a signature, the Ardabil carpets are key documents for the study of the medium. The role of the maker, whose name appears as ‘the servant of the court Masud of Kashan’, was most likely that of designer, but it is not certain whether he oversaw the manufacture of the carpets in Kashan or near the court in Tabriz or in another carpet-making centre such as Yazd. None of these remaining questions detracts, however, from the meditation-inducing beauty of the Ardabil carpets.

Visitors to the court of Shah Tahmasp report the use of sumptuous silk carpets not only inside his palaces but on the ground outside them and in encampments. When Michele Membré first encountered Tahmasp in 946/1539, he came upon the shah in a vast encampment at Marand to the west of Tabriz. In the midst of 5,000 tents, Shah Tahmasp’s court consisted of a succession of tented pavilions including an oblong audience hall, chambers for sleeping, a domed tent enclosing the bath and another domed tent ‘in which are painters’. Membré’s meeting with the shah was held in ‘the place of audience, with those beautiful pavilions, all decorated with cut designs of foliage inside and, on the floor, carpets of great price. The King was thus seated upon a takya-namad, that is a felt of Khurasan, which was of great price.’ In such a setting, where the king and his brothers spent their time fishing and hunting, the designs on their carpets may have been figural rather than floral and vegetal like the Ardabil carpets.

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31 Ardabil carpet, north-west Iran, signed ‘the work of a servant of the court Masud Kashan’, dated 946/1539–40, silk and wool, 10.51 × 5.34 m, Victoria and Albert Museum, 272–1895.
A group of very fine carpets with hunters on horseback and on foot chasing deer and small game and fighting lions can be placed in the second quarter of the sixteenth century on the basis of a signed and dated example in the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan. The carpet with its silk warps, cotton wefts and wool knots bears the name of Ghiyath al-Din Jamé and the date 949/1542-3. At forty-one knots per square centimetre it is only slightly less fine than the London Ardabil carpet. Its central lobed medallion and four corner pieces contains a symmetrical arrangement of flying cranes and cloud scrolls. An even more luxurious example of carpet-making in this period is the hunting carpet in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, which has silk warps, wefts and knots as well as silver gilt, silver and silk brocade [fig. 52]. In its quadripartite central medallion and its four corner pieces the long tail feathers of the mythical bird, the simargh, echo the contours of the medallion. The hunt takes place on a yellow silk ground punctuated by a spiral arabesque. Yet, unlike the Poldi Pezzoli carpet and other small silk hunting carpets of this period, the main border is inhabited by noblemen being served wine and fruit in a garden setting. While the hunt is one of the oldest artistic and poetic metaphors of Iranian art, the inclusion of Safavid grandees on a picnic in the border localizes such a sumptuous carpet. If it did not actually accompany the shah or a member of his family on encampments, it may have served as a reminder of the glories of the field when the court was in the palaces of Tabriz.

Whereas the extant buildings and restorations that were commissioned either by or in the name of Shah Tahmasp attest to his desire to maintain and glorify the religious edifices of Safavid Iran, his most celebrated contribution to the arts in the first half of his reign was as a patron of deluxe illustrated manuscripts. Even if Tahmasp did not actually study painting with Bihzad in Herat between 922/1516 and 928/1522, his literary education would have

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32. Hunting carpet, Tabriz, c. 1540, silk and metallic threads, 4.8 x 2.55 m. Centennial Fund, gift of John Goelet and unrestricted textile purchase funds. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 66.295. This is one of the finest examples of court-level carpet manufacture in which favourite themes of 16th-century Safavid visual arts - hunting, feasting and imaginative birds - are combined.
been derived from the books in the Timurid royal library. Certainly illustrated manuscripts of the late fifteenth-century Herat school and perhaps even the Shahnameh produced in 853/1450–50 for the bibliophile Timurid prince Baysungbul would have been available to the young Tahmasp. Thus, as Dickson and Welch have maintained, Prince Tahmasp would have returned to Tabriz in 928/1521 familiar with the taste of Timurid Herat.86 The style of painting embodied by Bihzad’s works is characterized by spatially rational compositions, a lively portrayal of individuals in a range of expressive poses, extremely careful and precise technique and a brilliant palette in which blue, green and gold are used liberally.

Either because of the appointment of Bihzad as head of the royal artists’ workshop at Tabriz or to accommodate Tahmasp’s preference for the cooler, more orderly painting of Herat, Sultan Muhammad, the director of Shah Tahmasp’s Shahnameh project subtly adapted his style during the 1520s. The result was a range of extraordinary illustrations in the Tahmasp Shahnameh of which ‘The Court of Gayumars’, folio 20v, is the crowning achievement [Fig. 33]. The painting depicts the first Iranian king, Gayumars seated in the centre on a rocky throne, telling his son, Siyamak, that he will be killed by the Black Div, the incarnation of evil, and that the only salvation for the world will be Hushang, Siyamak’s son who stands at the left. Until this time, Gayumars and the race of men who dressed in leopard skins had lived in peace with all creatures, a condition demonstrated by the men carrying the deer up the mountain on the right or the crouching man holding a lion cub next to its mother. The oval composition underpins the upward movement of rocks and figures which is counterbalanced by the downward rush of the now tarnished silver waterfall in the centre of the picture and the remarkable melting blues, pinks and lavenders of the rocks. While Sultan Muhammad’s attention to composition may have been inspired by contact with Herat school painter or paintings, he preserved to a remarkable degree the myria Turkman-style hidden grotesque faces of people and animals that populate the rocks and clouds like souls animating the landscape. In contrast to the idealized faces of Gayumars and his race of people, these tiny visages in the rocks are often individualized, raising the question of whether they might be concealed portraits rather than simply monsters of the artist’s imagination.